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Summary: It's the opening night of the Fourth of July carnival and everything that can go wrong has gone wrong for our newly minted giraffe-height Mike Wheeler. How will El react to such a wastoid like him on her first night out on the town in two months? Part 18 of the "Stories From Summer" series over on tumblr. Prompt: 'Stuck at the top of a Ferris wheel.'

Growing Pains

"Can you just pay me?" Mike grumbled as he stood next to his mom at the kitchen counter and watched with fumbling hands while the sunlight began to dim over the horizon out the window.

"Michael!" she chided. "There's no need to be rude."

"Sorry, I'm just... I'm late," he bit, trying with everything he had to be polite to the woman who was *two hours late* getting home.

Mrs. Wheeler shook her head as she dug into her purse and pulled out seven dollars from her wallet and handed it to him. "Be home by ten, or call me if you're staying somewhere. We're not having you disappear into the night anymore."

"I *know*..." Mike huffed. Her eyes narrowed and his shoulders dropped in reply. "Thank you."

"Have a nice night, honey," she said, her mood bouncing back as she swept her hair over her shoulder and moved deeper into the kitchen. "Holly! What do you want for dinner – "

Mike's mom's voice faded to the background as he rushed up the stairs on his aching legs. He catapulted into this room and tugged his closet door open.

It was half empty.

"Mom! Is there clean laundry downstairs?!"

"No honey, I haven't done it yet!"

"Shit!"

"*Michael!*"

But Mike wasn't listening anymore. He was too busy staring agape at his closet, completely at a loss.

Still standing in his pajamas that he'd been wearing all day while

stuck with Holly, Mike scowled. All that remained on the hangers was years and years of old striped shirts and jeans, each one a more useless scrap of fabric than the next.

Nothing fit anymore. Not a single thing.

Of course. OF COURSE this was the day that his mom fell behind on laundry. Just like this *had* to be the day that she needed to be out to 'lunch and a movie with the girls' while his Dad played golf, thereby chaining Mike to the house the entire day, *against his will*, to babysit.

No one ever had the decency to ask if there was any place *he* needed to be.

And there was.

THERE WAS.

There *was* some place he was supposed to be.

And now? Now he was running late, stuck with absolutely nothing to wear, on the eve of a very very **very** important night.

Mike rolled his eyes and sighed as he stepped forward into the closet in hopes of finding something, anything, that fit. But he stopped instantly as yet another flare of pain shot up from below his knee. He groaned, his patience waning in a dangerous way.

The ice earlier in the morning hadn't helped. That wasn't a surprise. It never helped, no matter how often his mom made him try. ("*The doctor said this is the best remedy, Michael. We need to listen to him.*"). More than that, the stretches she'd made him do hadn't done anything other than humiliate him as he watched his gangly arms try and fail to reach the end of his even more gangly legs.

Growing six inches in six months was insane. He absolutely hated it.

It had started over the winter, small pains and pricks here and there as his pants became too short too fast. It had bloomed into a full fledged chronic pain as they entered spring. Mike felt like he'd been stretched like Gumby. It was like some agonizing genetic force of nature had taken over his life and dropped him instantly inside of a

foreign and clumsy adult-sized body.

At 5'10", he now towered over almost everyone he knew and he could look his dad dead in the eye. Everyone told him he should be thankful. That everyone wanted to be tall and he was so lucky that the doctor said he still hadn't stopped growing. But why would he be thankful for the fact that he tripped every five minutes like a baby giraffe learning how to walk?!

More than any of the annoyances though, what he really couldn't handle the most was the *pain*. It radiated almost constantly from right below his knees. The doctor said the condition had a name, but Mike hadn't been listening when he'd said it. To him, it was simply a weird awkward curse that was making it annoyingly difficult to enjoy the best summer ever.

Because this really had the potential to be... the best summer ever.

The pain receded for a moment as she flitted through his mind, like it always seemed to do. Mike bit back the smile that tried to crawl to his lips, too comfortable wallowing in his supreme annoyance to allow the thought of her to wash it all away.

But that was... difficult. She had a unique way of doing that. Of clearing out his brain until it felt clean, wiping off his anxiety and frustration and making things simple and... good.

Really good.

He couldn't bite back the smile the second time it succeeded in fighting its way onto his face.

The nervous excitement he'd been trying to control all day bubbled uncomfortably in his stomach yet again as his mind came back to the night at hand. Today, for the first time in two months, and for only the fourth time *at all*, El was going to be joining them out in public.

She'd only been allowed to join him at the Snow Ball in December, once in February to see The Breakfast Club (which hadn't really liked, but El had just been so excited that he loved it by proxy), and once in May, when she'd convinced Hopper to let her go see The Breakfast

Club *again* while it was on a second run matinee. Other than that, their relationship was relegated to nightly phone calls and a solo visit to the cabin every Tuesday after school.

While he'd been so excited to spend the day with her the last two times she'd been allowed out, tonight was special. Mike bounced subconsciously on the balls of his feet as he thought about, trill of anticipatory energy shooting from his body.

Tonight?

Tonight was opening night of the Fourth of July carnival.

Most days out of the year, Hawkins, Indiana was a supreme drag. But during the Fourth of July carnival? During the Fourth of July carnival Mike couldn't think of any place else he'd rather live. Sure, the games were all rigged by the crazy traveling carnies, and the rides were flimsy and rickety, carted into on the back of big trucks. But none of that mattered.

All that mattered was that tonight El was going to be there with him.

Mike had been looking forward to his for months. He had forgone so many nights at the arcade in order to save up every single cent he could, with the singular intention of making this the best possible date in the world. He couldn't wait to show El the games and the lights and the prizes and the funnel cakes. Funnel cakes. Oh my God, she was going to *lose her shit* over funnel cakes.

But now? Now, he was running late, his legs crying in stupid unending pain as he stared at a half empty closet of too small clothing.

He reached the end of his search and sighed as he looked at the only shirt he knew still fit...

...The damned yellow short sleeved button up his Grandmother had bought him, too big, the summer before. The damned yellow short sleeved button up he had hidden in the back of his closet in hopes it would miraculously disappear.

("You're growing into such a fine young man, Michael! You'll grow into

it!")

Well, she wasn't wrong... He had grown into it...

Mike groaned yet again, his legs stiff and protesting as he leaned forward and tugged the shirt dejectedly from the hanger. He held it in his hands with disdain, cursing his mother once again for not throwing the laundry in before she'd left for the day.

She'd been gone so much lately... he didn't understand it. At least her constant absence was good for his piggy bank.

Accepting his fate, and hoping dearly that El would be able to still like him despite his hideous shirt, Mike got dressed and bolted from the house en route to Will's where Hopper had probably already dropped off El.

The trip took a little longer than it used to due to the fact that Mike was now too big for his bike. With Jonathan's help, he had raised the handlebars and seat as high as possible a couple months back, but he was still having to hunch and scrunch as he pedaled his way through town. He felt like giant riding a tricycle. Each rotation of the pedals was awkward, uncomfortable, and allowed a seamless portal for his bad mood to slip right back into his too long bones. It twisted his gut and made his mind run with his high expectations as he found the way down the roads by sense memory.

The sun was just setting over the horizon when Mike arrived at Will's.

"Finally!" Dustin cried as Mike pulled up into the driveway. The boys were all there, pulling their bikes up from the ground. Max stood at the side, her skateboard held impatiently in hand.

"Were you leaving?!" Mike cried incredulously as he skidded to a stop.

"We thought you stood us up!" Lucas defended at Mike's tone.

"Why would I – "

"Sorry, Mike," Will replied, much more sincerely than Lucas. "I called your house but no one answered and we didn't know..."

"You're here!"

The boys shut up as El's voice echoed from the front porch.

El stepped out from the door as she spoke. Her hair was curly but tamed, sitting just above her shoulders as she smiled at him from where she stood. She wore a simple free flowing cream colored sundress under a light jean jacket. Every piece of clothing was mildly familiar from Nancy's old closet, but it all took on a brand new air the second El wore them.

Mike dropped his bike without hesitation and crossed quickly to the porch as his mood altered in a dizzyingly instant swing.

"Hi!" he said energetically as he neared her.

"Hi," she replied, her smile tentative yet excited as she bit her lip. "I didn't know if you were – "

"I know. I'm sorry..." he rambled as he reached out for her hand. "I had to watch Holly and my mom was late and I – I'm sorry I'm late."

"Guys, come on!" Max's voice drifted in the background.

"You look... really pretty," Mike stuttered as he nervously played with her fingers, unaware of the world of impatient friends behind him.

"Thank you," she said sincerely as she tucked a curl behind her ear with her free hand.

"Are you excited?"

"*Wheeler!*" Max cried again. "You can stare longingly into each other's eyes all night, but right now we *need to go!*"

El nodded in reply to his question as Mike rolled his eyes, his cheeks blushing from Max's words. "You can ride on the back of my bike," he said hopefully. "It'll be like old times."

"Okay!" she replied, bouncing on the balls of her feet. She stepped forward and started her way toward his bike, pulling him along behind her. Her face was alight in a way that made him feel

weightless as she looked back at him.

"Finally," Dustin grumbled as he shifted on his seat.

"Just – just hold on a minute!" Mike bit back at Dustin's impatience as he pulled his bike from the ground and stepped over it, holding it steady so El could get on. El gathered her skirt into her hand and gingerly stepped over to sit on the seat, making his heart jump as he could feel her behind him. This was going to be awesome.

"Ready?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Yes."

Mike attempted to sit... and sat directly on top of her.

"Sorry..."

"It's okay."

Mike tried to resituate, shifting his body this way and that as he tried to figure out how to –

"Mike, that is not going to work." Lucas said beside him with his trademark skeptic tone.

Mike looked up to see the four of them staring at him with a mix of worry and amusement.

"Just give me a minute!" Mike bit back as he tried again to figure out a way to pedal the bike with El on the back.

"Owe!"

"I'm sorry, El!"

"Mike..." Will said tentatively. "I don't... um... I think you're too tall to ride tandem on that bike anymore."

Mike stared at Will in annoyance...

He tried again, failed, and smashed his hand in frustration against the handle bars. He felt El jump slightly behind him.

Will was right.

It was scientifically impossible to him to ride his bike with El on the back...

His face began to smart with embarrassment and his hands began to sweat as he felt everyone staring at him. The whole night felt like it was slipping through his fingers, absolutely nothing was going as planned.

"Mike?" El said quietly as she tapped him on the shoulder. Her voice echoed a softness that made him feel both better and worse at the same time. "I can ride with someone else."

"No, it's just – I don't know." His shoulders slumped. "I - "

"You can ride with me, El," Will cut in helpfully. ... Mike grimaced. He had never wanted to punch Will before... "I think I can make the space."

"Is that... okay?" El asked from behind him.

Mike looked up at Will. Will's eyes were apologetic. He shrugged and Mike sighed in reply.

"Yeah. I can't... this doesn't work... I'm sorry, El. I guess we don't really have any other choice."

"Okay..."

El moved tentatively from behind him, her arms brushing against his back as she did so, leaving cold trails against his stupid yellow shirt as she left him and maneuvered onto the back of Will's bike without difficulty. Will shrugged at Mike in empathy as El placed her hands on Will's shoulders.

Mike bit the inside of his mouth in unfocused anger. He awkwardly kicked off on his bike, averting his eyes from the others as he pedaled hard and fast down the out of the drive way. "Come on guys, we're gonna be late!"

"Did he just accuse *us* of being late?" Dustin scoffed from behind him

as Mike darted out in the lead.

Their voices faded away as Mike biked as fast as he could toward the center of town. He tried to drown them out as he attempted to keep his angsty feelings at bay.

El's laugh echoed from where the everyone else traveled as a group.

A laugh he should have been feeling directly against his ear...

Mike's stomach plummeted in roaring frustration.

This. Was. A. Curse.

As if on cue, the pain in Mike's legs flared worse than before. He biked quietly, wincing at the discomfort as he kept his his eyes cold and steady on the road, their voices completely gone as he pedaled faster.

Finally, he made his way to the center of town, a block ahead of all of his friends. He tossed his bike down, tripping and almost falling as he tried to dismount, intensely grateful that no one had been there to see it.

Mike steadied himself before he crossed to the curb and waited across the street from Radio Shack near the entrance of the pop up carnival. He took in his surroundings as he did so. The lights of the carnival, usually so exciting, seemed dull and annoying against the darkening sky.

"Hey there, speed demon," Max called as she pulled up a moment later. She jumped off her skateboard beside him. "You never ride faster than me. What the hell was that about?"

"Yeah, sorry," Mike grumbled, "I just – I just wanted to get here."

"Yeah, *that* was obvious," she replied as she rolled her eyes and flung her hair over her shoulder. "You know she's still going to like you even if she can't ride on the back of your bike, right? That was cute, by the way, that you thought you could pull that off."

"God, you're annoying." Mike replied, looking at her darkly.

Max simply smirked and rammed her short shoulder into his elbow. He nudged her back in a playful retort.

Mike couldn't find it in himself to actually be mad at the girl. Over the months they had developed an odd truce, and their 'sometimes less than sunny' dispositions had forged them into a dark and sarcastic friendship that no one else really seemed to understand.

"See, there she is. And she's still looking at you all heart-eyed," Max joked, cooing dramatically. "I'm sure it'll be okay."

Mike was about to retort when El's voice drifted into the air.

"Thanks, Will."

Mike watched Will stop so that El could dismount before he took his bike to the same spot where Mike had dropped his own.

El walked toward Mike, her expression hesitant.

"You rode away so fast..." she said. She fidgeted her fingers against the hem of her jacket sleeve.

Mike stuttered, instantly feeling bad as he saw the slight look of hurt in her eyes.

"He just wanted to get here quick to find a place to stash the bikes. Right, Mike?" Max said, nudging him in a friendlier way than before.

"Uh... yeah. That. Right," Mike replied, following Max's lead. He was supremely thankful for Max's cover as he saw El's expression soften.

"Alright, you guys ready to rip up these games? I'm winning some prizes tonight!" Max called out to the party as they gathered, changing the subject. Max then turned on her heel, linked her arm in Lucas's and said, "Come on, Stalker. Lets go win me a teddy bear."

The rest of the party followed, leaving Mike and El behind.

"You want to go in?" Mike asked, his hands fidgeting at the edges of his pockets.

El nodded, her excitement back in her eyes as she spied the lights of the carnival. "Can we get one of those fu..fuzzy cakes you told me about?"

Mike laughed out loud, his heart softening as he took her hand and led her toward the entrance gate. "Funnel cakes. But...they're called fuzzy cakes now. That's way better."

The final rays of daylight disappeared and dropped them into night as they entered the carnival grounds in the town square. Mike relaxed, his excitement returning like a see-saw in his body as he walked hand in hand with El, the artificial lights illuminating the world around them.

The party each got a long strip of tickets for rides and games. They wound their way through the booths as Mike explained everything to her. He watched her as she took in the altered world around her with wide eyes as though she'd never seen anything like it before. Which in truth, she hadn't.

Every question she asked and every face she made was just... the cutest thing in the world.

"What's that big wheel?" El asked suddenly, pointing off in the distance as they rounded a corner.

The bright lights of the slowly spinning two-story-tall circle came into view.

"Oh, that's a Ferris wheel," Mike replied. "You can see the whole town when you're on top."

"I want to do that!" El squealed, her hand tightening enthusiastically around his as she let out a rare squeal of unbridled excitement.

"Yeah okay!" he replied eagerly. "Guys, do you –"

Mike turned to find the rest of their friends gathered at a nearby booth as Max prepared to absolutely decimate a water gun race game.

"We'll be at the Ferris wheel!" he called, not willing to lose the

opportunity to do something, anything, that El wanted to do.

Dustin waved back in confirmation.

"Guess it's just us, then," Mike said, looking down at her.

El's smile was easy and content. Excitement played in her honey eyes.
"That's fine."

"Okay..." Mike said, fighting his own smile and failing miserably as his heart swooped at the idea of venturing off alone with her.

Hand in hand, they made their way down the line of booths, El's feet speeding up with an anticipation that was absolutely contagious. The ride tickets suddenly felt like they were burning a hole in his pocket.

"Ooh! That says funnel cakes right?!" she cried out suddenly as she stopped in her tracks just two booths from their destination.

"Yeah!" Mike said excitedly.

They took a quick pit stop and veered in that direction. The line was short and in no time at all El held a Styrofoam plate with a glazed funnel cake in her hands. Her eyes were wide, as though she was trying to devour it with her powers. But it was just a bit too hot to eat just yet.

"Come on," Mike said, tugging her lightly behind him. "We can we it while we ride the ride!"

"Okay!"

They got in line and Mike explained to El the step by step process of how they loaded the Ferris wheel. "Yeah, so, we'll probably be in..." he counted the people in front of him. "That cart right there," he said, pointing to a cart with bright pink flowers three carts back up the large circle in the sky.

"Ooh, I like that one," she said, "It's pretty."

"Yeah, it's a good one," Mike replied, looking down at her. She was blowing on her funnel cake, trying impatiently to cool it. She looked

back up to him, her expression embarrassed yet playful as though she'd been caught doing something bad.

It was unbearable. She was just... the cutest thing on the planet.

"I'm really glad you got to come out tonight." Mike said, his heart skipping as she looked up at him.

Her eyes danced as she nodded in reply. "Me too."

Mike felt a sudden urge to kiss her, so strong and so overwhelming that it almost took control of his body without asking his mind. But she just felt so far away, and his need to hunch to even reach her lips made his self consciousness bloom enough to make him pause. She looked at him expectantly and -

"Next!" a carnival barker called, very close to his ear.

Mike jumped in surprise. He tugged El along behind him as he instinctively followed the man's call. The line in front of them was gone. He hurried forward to close the gap to the ride before -

-he tripped spectacularly over a taped down set of cables that crossed his path along the ground.

Mike's gangly limbs flew through the air as he fell flat on his face, his hand pulling El behind him. She cried out behind him.

Pushing the pain in his hands and knees from his mind, he rolled over on the ground, nervously checking on her.

She was fine. Still standing. Her face aghast as she stared heartbroken at the ground next to his head.

Mike looked to his left...

... the funnel cake was flat on the ground, glaze side down. Ruined. It was never coming back.

"You gonna get on this ride or are you just gonna lay there, kid?" the barker gruffed impatiently.

Mike scrambled up, a wave of self loathing and regret almost knocking him back down as he looked helplessly at El's fallen face. She stared at the funnel cake with a level of sadness so pure it looked like she had lost a friend.

"El, I am so – "

"Earth to kid, ya got tickets?" the surly man griped.

"Fine!" Mike shouted as he fished out his tickets with fumbling fingers. His face burned with the worst kind of embarrassment as he handed the tickets to the man. El looked away from the ground and stood awkwardly behind him, trying and failing to hide her disappointment.

"Get in," The ride operator said as he opened the tiny door to the cart. Mike clamored in. His knees hit against the metal of the front of the cart when he sat, his legs too long to comfortably sit. El followed quietly and sat beside him as the ride operator grumbled to himself about having to clean up some stupid kid's mess, shut the tiny door behind her, and pulled the lever to set them off into the air.

Every bad feeling that had existed in Mike's body had rushed back, full steam ahead. It was stupid. It was so stupid. But Mike was on the verge of tears as they raised into the air.

She was quiet for a moment before she finally cleared her throat beside him. "Are you... okay?"

She asked.

Mike sighed, unable to look at her. He nodded as he looked off over the dark town. "I'm sorry about your funnel cake. We'll get a new one when we're done. I promise," he said quietly.

"It's okay. It was an accident," she said kindly. "But... Are you... Are you mad at me?" she breathed nervously.

Mike whipped around to her in surprise. "What? No! I'm..." he sighed dramatically, unable to hide his emotions from her.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing..."

"Mike." El's tone changed, and in an instant he felt her cut through his bullshit like a knife.

He looked down at El for real this time. Not with expectation. Not with nervousness or butterflies or any of that. But as Mike, looking at El, as the unique honesty between them took full control.

"I just..." Mike sighed to himself as he ran his fingers through his hair. "I just wanted tonight to be perfect and everything is going wrong."

She looked at him quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"I don't - I just -" he sputtered helplessly as he leaned back and huffed. "I just - I feel like I'm this big dumb giraffe and I'm messing everything up, you know? I've got this long dumb spider legs that go on forever and I can't control them and I tripped and made you lose your funnel cake and you can't even fit on the back of my bike with me anymore and I can't get my legs to stop hurting and none of my clothes fit so I had to wear this *stupid* shirt that looks like I spilled mustard all over it and I - "

"Mike - ?"

"I don't know I just... I'm sorry. I'm ruining the night."

Mike's cheeks began to burn with self reproach as he shoulders slumped and he looked away.

"Mike..." she repeated softly.

Mike braved a look back at her. "Yeah?"

El dropped her hand on his. "Everything is okay." She smiled slightly, her eyes filled with kindness and concern.

He softened in reply, overwhelmed by the sensation of her reaching out to touch him. It was a feeling he still hadn't gotten used to, no matter how many times it had happened.

"Thanks," he said sincerely, the walls he'd been building all night simply gone at her touch. "I'm really sorry. I've been such a wastoid. I just wanted tonight to be perfect."

"It is perfect," she replied earnestly, a twinkle returning to her soft brown eyes as she gestured out. "Look."

Mike looked up to find that they had somehow gotten to the top of the Ferris Wheel. The small town came into full shadowed view. A few errant stars broke through artificial lights in the night sky above. Mike looked back at El as she looked out over the town. Her face lit in an array of shifting colors from the lights below. She sparkled with reds, then blues, then purples and yellows and greens. Her hair had escaped from the light bit of gel she had put in, the breeze from the bike and the Ferris Wheel releasing her curls to frame her face in the sweetest way.

She was...

"You look really really pretty tonight, El," Mike said finally, his voice softer as he flexed his fingers to curl up with hers.

El blushed, her lips turning upward in a tentative smile as she averted her eyes from his and then looked back, just as she always did.

"You look really handsome tonight," she said as her eyes twinkling with lights.

Mike's brain stopped.

"I... I... huh?"

"Oh! Did I say it wrong?" El asked quickly, her face falling nervously.

"No... I ... " he stuttered. "Did you just call me handsome?"

"Yes?" She confirmed hesitantly. "Is it the... wrong word?"

"No... I don't know... I mean... I just..." Mike sighed. "I'm just not handsome."

"Handsome means... pretty? Right? Pretty... for boys?" she asked.

"Yeah...?" Mike replied hesitantly.

El smiled in reply as she nodded, her nervousness gone in an instant. "Okay, yes. That's what I mean. You're handsome."

"Um..."

Mike just stared at her, absolutely gobsmacked. His lips did not know how to create the smile her words elicited. His heart did not know how to handle the tremble.

"I just..." Mike sputtered once again. "I don't think I'm handsome."

El practically gasped. Her face fell into an incredulous contortion. "No? Why?"

"I'm like..." Mike sighed, something uncomfortable and hard controlling his chest. It snapped out suddenly, his words beyond control. "Because my hair will never lay down and my nose feels too big for my face and..." he looked down to where she still felt too far away. "Just look how much taller I am than you, sitting even! You can't even reach me. I'm just too tall and my limbs are all spindly and it's weird and I hate it and I'm just a mess. I'm – "

"You're not too tall," she interjected simply. "I can reach you easy."

"Hardly," he joked as he straightened up and looked down on her, an easy six inches above her, "Look, you're all the way down there."

She smiled and shook her head. "I don't have to be."

Mike's eyes narrowed in confusion, his ramble stopped by her enigmatic words.

El smiled a conspiratorial smile. She looked over her shoulders slowly. They were still on the tip top of the Ferris wheel, out of sight of every living soul. Finally, she looked back up at him, her lip bitten and her eyes dancing.

"I can reach you easy."

Mike gaped...

...as El *floated up* to meet his height.

The whole world faded away from Mike Wheeler's mind as El Hopper floated in the air beside him. Her eyes were serious yet playful as she met him face to face, her body six inches off of the hard plastic seat.

Every bad feeling he had had all day, all week, all year, his entire life, simply vanished his body as he regarded the beautiful creature beside him with awe. He'd known she could float... he'd heard her say it once... but seeing her like this? This was a whole other thing entirely.

"Do you feel too tall *now*?" El whispered as she leaned in, her eyes dancing with mirth.

Mike choked out a single word.

"...no...?"

"Good," El replied. Her hand closed tighter around his. Mike froze, not believing his supremely good fortune, as she drifted...*drifted*... to bridge the gap between them. She leaned in slowly at first, seeming to test the waters, before she laid her lips softly upon his. Her kiss was sweet and kind and delicate and made his chest purr with a contentment he didn't have words for. Slowly, he leaned back into her. She wrapped her arms around his neck in reply, using him to stabilize herself while she was in the air....

Mike lost himself at the top of that Ferris Wheel as he kissed her, leaning deeper and longer into her than he ever had before, never wanting to let this floating girl out of his arms.

Finally, after a period of seconds or days or years, who cared, Mike pulled back and dropped his forehead breathlessly against hers.

"You're incredible..." he whispered as his arms tightened around her.

"Incredible?" she asked softly. "I don't –"

"Incredible..." he repeated playfully, "Like, the coolest, best, most

amazing, mind blowing, did I mention the coolest? Just yeah..." he stuttered unabashedly. "All of that. Incredible."

Mike could see El's features, foggy in his vision from how close he was, contort into the cutest shyest smile.

"You're incredible too..." she whispered.

"Hardly."

"No. You're incredible," the floating girl said with conviction, as though she'd known the word all her life. "Incredible and handsome, really handsome." She giggled. "You are. Stop being mean to yourself."

Mike felt the impulse to fight her on it again, but her final request stopped him in his tracks. A crack developed in his chest, scary and vulnerable, and he breathed deep as he felt her words finally sink in.

"...You really think I'm handsome?" Mike asked shakily.

"The most handsome," El teased. And with that, she lowered from the air and back down into her seat. Mike bent down and followed her on instinct, unwilling to let her go. The difference in their heights didn't bother him nearly as much this time around.

"I like that you're tall," she said, her fingers playing softly against the back of his neck.

"Yeah?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes," El replied with a glint in her eye. "But you can never be too tall. Not for me. I can always be just as tall... if I want."

Mike laughed, his body feeling so light he thought *he* might float as he leaned against her. His lips found their way to the top of her hair. She cuddled into him in reply, small and warm and curled easily into his long arms. A grateful comfort overcame him as he felt her breath against his chest. A gratefulness to know her. A gratefulness to have her back. A gratefulness that finally someone...

"El?" Mike sighed vulnerably, his heart so apparent on his sleeve he

swore he could feel it beating there. "How do you always just... understand?"

El shrugged casually against him and laid her head against his shoulder. "I don't know."

"Apologies, riders," the carnival barker's voice echoed through the air. "We've got a stuck lever. Gonna be a few minutes while we fix it. Get comfortable, it might be a while."

A chorus of groans echoed out below them from the other carts.

Mike leaned down to her ear in a secret whisper. "You could probably get us down from here, couldn't you?" he asked.

El looked back up and smiled. She was quiet for a moment, a tension growing in the air. She nodded. "Yes. But..." she paused. Her hands inched up his arms and began a slow pull against his shoulders, "I... don't want to."

Mike's breath stilled.

"I – I don't want you to either," he whispered bravely.

El smiled and Mike followed her lead as he leaned down to meet her lips once again.

The carnival roared off in the distance. Cat calls and laughs and jeers echoed endlessly from the people below.

But in Mike and El's little cart, stuck all the way up at the top of their tiny world, everything was gloriously silent.

OoO

Writing fourteen year old Mike is such an delightful trip! I love my moody heart-eyed boy.

I'd love to hear from ya in the review, or come visit me over on tumblr dancingskygreen! Also, feel free to check out my other Mileven fics in my profile if you've got some time to kill ;)

Thanks for reading!

- L -